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Proposal floated to study Wingate's winds

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An environmental expert may study the winds that flowed from the old Wingate landfill incinerator's smokestacks, and identify wide areas where people may have been exposed to toxic chemicals.

That was among the latest ideas suggested in a proposed study that would search for a link between the landfill's contaminants and high rates of illness around it.

Black community leaders supported the study at a meeting on Thursday, despite skepticism from government officials that the \$120,000 earmarked for it may not be enough.

"Not only is the money short, but time is even shorter," said Ron Wilson, ombudsman for the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, which will make the money available only if the health-study proposal from Legal Aid Service of Broward County is strong enough.

Friction between competing community groups nearly jeopardized the health study, which must reach community consensus and be funded by Sept. 30, 2003.

The proposal -- complete with a line-item budget and commitments from participating experts -- is expected to reach the state Department of Health by July 8.

If the study bears out enough facts to merit more research, the state could apply for another \$120,000 in the second year.

But the second grant is by no means guaranteed, Wilson said, adding that his agency's budget has already been cut by \$6 million.

"The problem here is money," said Frank Estok, an environmental engineer and health specialist who works with Legal Aid. ``We're trying to get what we can for our dollar."

The study proposal goes beyond looking at a link between the landfill and high rates of cancer near it, and also seeks to study non-fatal diseases such as skin rashes, thyroid disorders and abnormal liver function, among other illnesses.

Although a previous version of the study sought to exhume the bodies of infants and to autopsy babies whose mothers live in the area around the capped landfill, the new version suggests that autopsy might have to be funded another way.

The landfill, at 1300 NW 31st Ave. in Fort Lauderdale, operated from 1954 to 1978. Some residents believe its contaminants made them sick, but no study has ever proven a link.

The city has capped the landfill and wants to create a golf course on the site. Some black community leaders support those plans. Others are focused on forcing the city to relocate residents and clean up toxic chemicals now buried under the plastic cap.